

Partnering for a sustainable approach to mining

Rio Tinto's QIT Madagascar Minerals (QMM) in Madagascar has been awarded the 2009 Nedbank Green Mining Award in the Environmental category.

The award honours a company that has made a significant effort in terms of protecting or improving the biophysical environment in which it operates. The adjudication of the awards was extensive and involved a detailed submission form, interview with an expert panel of adjudicators and a site visit to QMM in Madagascar. QMM was recognized for its groundbreaking work in environmental conservation in the Anosy region of southern Madagascar, and in particular, its net positive impact (NPI) on biodiversity.

QMM, which is 80% owned by Rio Tinto and 20% owned by the Government of Madagascar, has built a mineral sands mining operation near the regional capital of Fort-Dauphin.

We are delighted that QMM and its local and global partners have been recognised for protecting and conserving the unique biodiversity of the mining sites while building capacity for better use of the natural resources by the local community," said Ny Fanja Rakotomalala, president of QMM.

Madagascar has been identified as one of the world's 25 biodiversity hotspots, with very high species richness and high degrees of endemism – the occurrence of species found nowhere else. Littoral forests along the sandy coastal plain are among the country's various threatened ecosystems as the local populace often depend on them for wood and charcoal used for cooking, heating and construction.

While most of the proposed mining area consists of heavily degraded ecosystems, some deposits are also located underneath some of the last remnants of littoral forest.

QMM's overall goal since starting exploration in the late 1980s has been to protect the unique biodiversity of the area and achieve NPI on biodiversity. The biodiversity monitoring program includes more than 15 indicators assessing the cumulative impacts of construction and mining over time. The programme monitors forest areas, birds, reptiles and amphibians, lemurs and small mammals, marine turtles, whales, fishes, corals, benthos, crocodiles, vegetation, lobsters, etc. Mitigation measures are implemented where necessary.

With participation from the community, QMM has recorded a number of positive impacts in keeping with its objective to achieve a NPI. Among them is an Ecological Research Centre that includes a plant nursery, seed treatment station, restoration trials, and an education centre. QMM also set up smaller centres in the two neighbouring mining areas.

QMM also established conservation zones to protect unique biodiversity in the highly endangered littoral (coastal) forest, and agreed to forgo mining of about 12% of the deposit to create conservation zones. Three conservation zones totalling 620 hectares have been excluded from the three mining areas to protect the surviving littoral forest and 31,275 ha of legally protected biodiversity offsets have been established.

The new Ehoala Port was developed as Madagascar's second largest port. It will act as a catalyst for investment in the impoverished Anosy region and the country as a whole, not only boosting the tourist industry, but also bringing opportunities for agricultural production and business development through the provision of an import and export channel.

There is also a community reforestation programme whose goal is to plant 100 ha per year of fast-growing trees to supply communities with wood for fuel and charcoal around the mine sites. In addition, QMM in partnership with USAID established a

regional nursery in 2005 to provide a sustainable source of fuel for the local population and thereby reduce pressure on the native littoral forest remnants. To date, more than 1000 ha have been reforested with more than 1 million trees.

“Of course we have not done this alone. Active engagement with Madagascar government, local, national and international stakeholders has been fundamental to the success of the project. QMM worked closely with numerous specialist environmental organisations researching the region’s biodiversity. An independent biodiversity advisory committee was formed in 2001 to review the biodiversity strategy,” said Manon Vincelette, head of community affairs, biodiversity and sustainable development at QMM.

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